

VZCZCXR05738
PP RUEHPA
DE RUEHJL #0776/01 3621613
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 281613Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY BANJUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7206
INFO RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP PRIORITY
RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000776

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/28/2016

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM KMCA GA

SUBJECT: NDI IN THE GAMBIA: EXPLORING POLITICAL SPACE

REF: A. BANJUL 729 AND PREVIOUS

1B. BANJUL 699

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Classified By: Poloff Menaka M. Nayyar, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) In preparation for the January 25, 2007 National Assembly elections, representatives from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted Training of Trainers sessions on election observation with the three main political parties/coalitions December 15-21. The reps found all three parties/coalitions generally disorganized and assessed the level of political sophistication among political as well as civil society groups in The Gambia as woefully lacking. Their findings highlighted the depth of the need in The Gambia for ongoing support if progress is to be made in strengthening the country's democratic institutions. Accordingly, areas for collaboration between UNDP and NDI are being negotiated, and Post, which plans to submit a proposal for a ESF-funded project involving NDI, is also discussing further opportunities for funding NDI ventures with members of the international donor community in The Gambia. Despite some resistance from some members of the Gambian Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), which fiercely guards its mandate, particularly as regards election-related training, Gambian political parties could benefit significantly from NDI's involvement in country. END SUMMARY

NDI RETURNS

12. (C) On December 19, Ambassador Stafford, DCM, and Poloff met with Sidi Diawara, NDI Country Director for Cote d'Ivoire, and Makram Ouaiss, NDI's Washington-based Deputy Regional Director for Central and West Africa, to discuss both the Training of Trainers sessions (ToTs) conducted by NDI and the general political situation in The Gambia. The reps' visit -- the third by an NDI team since October (ref A) -- was geared towards fostering effective pollwatching by the three major political parties/coalitions -- the ruling Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), the opposition United Democratic Party (UDP) alliance, and the opposition National Alliance for Democracy and Development (NADD) coalition -- during the January 25, 2007 National Assembly elections. The trainings placed particular focus on adherence to the "code of good conduct" that is contained in the February 2006 Memorandum of Understanding brokered amongst the parties.

AN UNSOPHISTICATED POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

¶13. (C) The NDI team was able to hold ToT sessions with each political party coalition, but professed surprise at what they saw as all three parties' levels of "disorganization" -- relative to other parties NDI had worked with in Africa -- including the ruling APRC, despite their resource advantage. While party agents were reportedly enthusiastic about and receptive to the trainings, NDI reps expressed the need for follow-up efforts to ensure the lessons would "stick." The NDI team also was struck by the perceived lack of action by both the opposition parties, whose often-voiced frustration with the current regime was seen as yielding little more than hand-wringing. The NDI reps also viewed Gambian civil society as lacking dynamism, saying it seemed stymied by fear of government repression or retaliation. The NDI reps sensed that the political parties were "waiting for the international community to rescue them."

¶14. (C) When asked about the relative political situation in The Gambia compared to other countries in the region, NDI reps disclosed that they felt The Gambia was among the "least democratic" in West Africa, with the least sophisticated and organized political parties and civil society in the subregion. The level of civic education is abysmal, according to the NDI team, and Gambians seem to value the "peace and prosperity" platform of President Jammeh's APRC over the "democracy and empowerment" stance of the opposition coalitions. As a result, the reps said, The Gambia had a considerable way to go in the process of democratization.

NEEDED GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT IN THE WORKS

¶15. (SBU) The NDI reps were not daunted, however, by their
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analysis of the political environment in The Gambia. They stated their commitment to continuing work in The Gambia on capacity-building efforts with the political parties and possibly the National Assembly, and to increase political participation through improved civic education. The NDI reps said members of political parties had requested that NDI set up an office in The Gambia, adding, though, that was unlikely in the near future due to lack of resources. (COMMENT: Post is exploring options with other donors for collaborative democracy-strengthening projects with NDI in The Gambia and will report on any developments accordingly. We also intend to submit a proposal for an ESF-funded project involving NDI.
END COMMENT)

¶16. (SBU) Representatives from UNDP's governance program hailed NDI's latest work in The Gambia as successful and revealed plans to conduct UNDP-funded step-down trainings with NDI representatives in the near future. A source at UNDP indicated to Poloff an interest in further collaboration among UNDP, Post, and NDI, either with funding from UNDP itself or other donors in country. (NOTE: The UNDP governance team is currently developing and conducting training with Gambian civil society groups, building upon Post's FY06 DHRF grant for domestic election observation training. END NOTE)

FRICTION WITH THE IEC

¶17. (C) However, not all players were pleased with NDI's visit. In a December 22 meeting of the Steering Committee for Electoral Assistance Project, made up of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and members of the donor community, the chairman of the IEC indicated coolness toward further involvement by NDI in election-related trainings.

However, though the IEC is very protective of activities it deems to be within its remit, particularly with regard to training and voter and civic education (ref B), the IEC's vice-chairman succeeded in softening the chairman's negative outlook toward NDI and eliciting his acquiescence in further IEC/NDI dialog. The vice-chairman echoed the sentiments of the donor community by pointing out the distinction between the IEC's role of training political party agents in narrow, technical matters related to the election process and NDI's much broader role of fostering general political development.

¶8. (C) Asked to comment on the IEC chairman's anti-NDI outlook, an NDI representative noted in a private email to Poloff that the chairman has a "completely different and awkward understanding" of the role of an electoral commission, and hinted that the IEC was taking a "partisan" (i.e. pro-ruling party APRC) approach to its mandate. (NOTE: This observation has been voiced by several sources, both domestic and international. END NOTE)

COMMENT: ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

¶9. (C) NDI's determination to continue its work in The Gambia -- despite what it sees as the especially challenging local political and civic environment -- is heartening, and the links being forged between UNDP and NDI are steps in the right direction. NDI's proposed further involvement in The Gambia may produce further strains with the IEC, but for now, at least, there appears to be enough support from the vice-chairman of the IEC and the donor community to carry subsequent projects forward. Post continues to support the work of NDI in The Gambia and will explore further areas of possible cooperation and support -- whether under an ESF project or otherwise -- with a long-term outlook aimed at strengthening both political parties and legislative institutions, particularly the National Assembly. END COMMENT STAFFORD